

Christmas Traditions

Christmastime is a time for children, right? Well yes and no. It's true that as parents we don't get the same type of joy from the holidays that children do. As adults our joy often comes from watching our children enjoy the holidays. However our joy of the season doesn't begin and end there. We each have expectations attached to the holiday.

Whether you live in a tropical climate or the picturesque traditional snowy scene greets your door every holiday, everyone has their own picture of Christmas. Christmas trees, angels, wreaths, caroling, hot chocolate, silent midnight church services, candles, delightful cookies, rich eggnog, Figgie pudding, lights, and of course the jolly St. Nick and presents wrapped in colorful paper.

We also expect to follow certain traditions. Maybe they are traditions that we grew up with – like cutting down a tree every year. Maybe they're traditions that evolved due to circumstances – like going to your local Christmas Eve church service. Maybe they're traditions that appeal to you for other reasons – like the desire to educate your children about other cultures. So...

How do you celebrate Christmas?

When I was a child Christmas meant following my mother and my sisters around for hours until the 'perfect' tree was found. Then my poor dad would cut it down and haul it back to the car. Christmas also meant midnight church services, caroling with friends, my father reading us "the night before Christmas" while my sisters and I sat around him in matching red and white flannel pajamas and of course the wonderful Christmas morning where presents were opened. In retrospect it was the perfect "Norman Rockwell Christmas.

My best friend from Finland had different traditions. Her family feasted on pickled herring and boiled cod and opened their presents on Christmas Eve. A beautiful friend from the Philippines, her family spent much of the day in church and the day ended in a pageant. As a child I quickly learned that everyone celebrates Christmas differently. As an adult I can look back and see that the traditions my family followed weren't just for their benefit, they were for us – the children.

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Where did these traditions come from?

Do you hang Christmas stockings by the fireplace?

According to legend, a kind nobleman in despair over the death of his wife, squandered his fortune and left his three daughters without dowries, which meant they faced the life of a spinster.

St. Nicholas, yes the one and only, heard about the girl's problems. He rode his horse by the nobleman's house and threw three small pouches of gold coins down the chimney where they were miraculously captured by the stockings the young women had hung by the fireplace to dry. They awoke to find stockings full of gold and their problems were solved.

Do you hang mistletoe?

The ancient Celts believed mistletoe to have magical healing powers and used it as an antidote for poison, infertility, and to ward of evil spirits. The plant was also seen as a symbol of peace. It is said that among Romans, that enemies who met under mistletoe would lay down their weapons and embrace.



Do you place Poinsettias around your home?

The poinsettia is a native Mexican plant named after the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Joel R. Poinsett, who brought the plant to America in 1828. Poinsettias were likely used by Mexican Franciscans in their 17th century Christmas celebrations. One legend has it that a young Mexican boy, on his way to visit the village Nativity scene, realized he had no gift for the Christ child. He gathered pretty green branches from along the road and brought them to the church. Though the other children mocked him, when the leaves were laid at the manger, a beautiful star-shaped flower appeared on each branch. The bright red petals, often mistaken for flowers, are actually the upper leaves of the plant.

What about the ever present candy cane?

Perhaps you might be familiar with this strategy...legend has it that candy canes were given to children to keep them quiet during religious ceremonies and the custom worked so well that it rapidly became a custom throughout Europe.

Urban legend tells us that the candy cane's symbolism hold that the color white represents Christ's purity, the red the blood he shed, and the presence of three red stripes the Holy Trinity. There are also stories that indicate the candy cane is actually a letter J to represent Jesus. There is no evidence to support either of these stories but it doesn't really matter to families who enjoy them year after year and adorn their Christmas tree with the sweet treats.

Do you send Christmas cards?

Sir Henry Cole is purported to have s credited the first Christmas card. As the story goes, Sir Henry, the first director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, was too busy to create individual greetings for his friends so he commissioned an artist, John Calcott Horsley, to illustrate a card and inscribe it with a holiday greeting.

Do you have a Christmas tree?

While a decorated Christmas tree can be traced back to the ancient Romans who during their winter festival decorated trees with small pieces of metal in honor of Saturnus, it is really credited to Martin Luther. Luther, after an inspiring evening walk through a forest of evergreens, attempted to describe the starry scene to his family. Unable to express in words what he had witnessed, he brought a tree into his home and decorated it with candles.



And where exactly did this Santa Claus come from?

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Santa Claus started with a real person, Saint Nicholas, a minor saint from the fourth century: Poor St. Nick lived a difficult life. Born in the ancient Lycian seaport city of Patara, he was imprisoned during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians but was released under the rule of Emperor Constantine the Great.

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His reputation for generosity and kindness gave rise to legends of miracles he performed for the poor and persecuted. People from all over the world honored him. He became the patron saint of Russia and Greece.

The legend of St. Nick came to the United States when Dutch colonists brought the traditions and folktales with them.

Choosing Your Holiday Traditions:

My mother's perfect holiday Christmas tree hunt often resulted in crying children and yelling adults - not what she had in mind I'm sure. Holidays are full of expectations and families are full of surprises! When these expectations, like expecting to have the perfect Christmas tree, collide with the surprises having a family can bring like stomach aches and of course the inevitable "I'm Bored!" things don't always turn out the way parents had hoped. So, how do you create lasting traditions that everyone enjoys?

In order to manage your expectations around your chosen holiday traditions it is important to consider why the traditions exist and what they mean to you.

What are your goals for your holiday traditions?

- Do you want your children to take them with you when they're grown?
- Do you want to share a bit of your childhood with your children?
- Do you want to show respect to your parents and their traditions?
- Do you want to teach your children about traditions around the world?

How can you keep your Traditions going?

The holidays are a really busy time for many and it is often difficult to make sure that all of the important traditions are followed. Here are a few tips to make sure they don't get lost in the shuffle:

Write them down. I know this sounds silly to those that like to fly by the seat of their pants but if a tradition is important to you, a simple holiday journal will make it easy. You can also store holiday cards, addresses, direction to where the holiday decorations are hidden in the garage.

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Put your children, if they're old enough, in charge of a tradition. My children are great about reminding me exactly how we're supposed to decorate the tree and who put the angel on top last year. They're also excellent at reminding me what cookies we're supposed to make and how they're made. Children love traditions and it's usually pretty easy to know which ones are important to them.

Schedule your traditions into your calendar. If cutting down a holiday tree is an important part of your holiday traditions then schedule it before the holidays hit. That way, it can't be missed and you won't find yourself on a last minute run to the hardware store to pick over the remnant trees – trust me, it isn't fun.

Schedule cookie baking time, schedule time to decorate your home, schedule caroling or sledding, or what ever holiday traditions are important to you and your family. If they're on your calendar they won't be overlooked.

What Holiday traditions can you add to your family's season that your children can take with them when they go?

Here are some ideas:

Talk to your children about the Christmas story and teach them about how other cultures celebrate the season. For example Kwanza and Haunakka

Kwanza.

Doctor Maulana Karenga, a Professor at California State University in Long Beach, California, created Kwanzaa in 1966. Kwanza, which means fruit of the harvest in Swahili, encourages African-Americans to remember their African heritage and is celebrated from December 26 to January 1. Kwanza is based on seven principles called Nguzo Saba:

- Umoja (Unity),
- Kujichagulia (Self-determination),
- Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility),
- Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics),
- Nia (Purpose),

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- Kuumba (Creativity), and
- Imani (Faith).

In the Kwanzaa ritual, seven candles called Mishumaa Saba are placed in a candleholder called a Kinara. Three green candles representing the color of the motherland are placed on the left, three red candles representing blood that has been shed are placed on the right and a black candle representing the faces of the African people in the center, each candle representing one of the seven principles of the celebration. One candle is lit each day of the Kwanzaa celebration, beginning from left to right.

Hanukkah

Commencing on the 25th day of the Hebrew month Kislev, Hanukkah is a Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the Syrians.

In 168 BC, members of the Jewish family Maccabee led a revolt against the Greek Syrians due to the policies of Syrian King Antiochus IV which were aimed at nullifying the Jewish faith. Part of this stratagem included changing the Beit HaMikdash - the Holy Temple in Jerusalem - to a Greek temple complete with idolatry. Led by Judah Maccabee, the Jews won victory over the Syrians in 165 BC and reclaimed their temple.

After cleansing the temple and preparing for its rededication, it was found there was not enough oil to light the N'er Tamid, an oil lamp present in Jewish houses of worship which represents eternal light. Once lit, the lamp should never be extinguished.

A search of the temple produced a small vial of undefiled oil -- enough for only one day. Miraculously, the Temple lights burned for eight days until a new supply of oil was brought. In remembrance of this miracle, one candle of the Menorah - an eight branched candelabra - is lit each of the eight days of Hanukkah. Hanukkah, which means dedication, is a Hebrew word when translated is commonly spelled Hanukah, Chanukah, and Hannukah due to different translations and customs.

The tradition of receiving gifts on each of the eight days of Hanukkah is relatively new and due in part to the celebration's proximity to the Christmas season.

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Conclusion

The absolute best way to establish and carry on family traditions is to get your family involved in the process. If it is an old family tradition that you are carrying on with your family, tell your children why it is important to you. Ask your children what family Christmas traditions they would like to have. Lastly, involve your family in being responsible for your traditions. If you start them young, chances are they'll carry those traditions with them when they're grown and gone. Our children are only with us for a short time, remember to enjoy your time with them, especially during the holidays, and to not let our expectations around the holidays overshadow their enjoyment of the season and what's truly important.



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